

Aberystwyth University

Integration over Interface: Printmaking 2028

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Integration over Interface: Printmaking 2028

As I ponder what printmaking will be like in the year 2028, I'm slightly perturbed by the thought that by then, I'll be sixty-five, undoubtedly retired, but hopefully still able enough to be graining and printing stones in my garret – a supposition corroborated by the experience of at least two friends who are still printing well into their eighties.

The subtext to this question may be the survival of traditional printmaking in the face of the digital revolution. Fifteen years ago I remember the very same being discussed with Rosemary Simmons – the then editor of *Printmaking Today*.¹ At that time the economy was similarly diving into recession. The print market, which had been so buoyant and impossibly inflated a few years previously, had collapsed – the bubble had burst.

Printmaking, seemingly under threat from the emergence of digital printing, the introduction of new stringent health and safety regulations and swingeing cuts in education was predicted by many to disappear. Certainly throughout the 1990s a great many workshops and college departments in the UK shrank or closed. Significantly investment was redirected in to computers and software, frequently updated and replaced at huge expense on an annual basis.

Initially there was deep suspicion and at the same time great enthusiasm for digital printing. There was much talk of hybrid printmaking, research into the interface between digital and analogue, the combination of processes and computer generated images for screenprinting, etching and lithography. The premise for such activity was as much concerned with the justification and affirmation of digital prints – ink jet prints and laser prints as it was about the survival of conventional printmaking in a digital age.

In 2008 it is reported that the Internet has come of age and that this year's US Presidential race is as virtual as it is real. Digital printing, which encompasses both printmaking and photography, is now an independent art form in itself. And yet increasingly even this is being challenged as artists and students explore working online, developing interactive websites, blogs, film and animation. Saved to disc,

broadcast online or projected, *none* of this material now requires to be printed at all: a paperless revolution indeed. Which of course is fine until a switch is flicked, a power cut occurs or the computer's RAM is fried by lightning.

In 1993 Rosemary Simmons confidently predicted that printmaking would survive, as interest in the skill and craft of traditional processes re-emerged. To a large extent this has proved to be the case, certainly in Aberystwyth where traditional processes of etching, woodcut, wood engraving and lithography have remained popular. Those essential intrinsic qualities of printmaking; that excitement of peeling-back a print from plate, block or stone; the kiss of ink on paper continues to captivate new generations of students and undoubtedly will ensure a flourishing future.

By the same token the increasing sophistication of computers and software has expanded the frontiers of printmaking, enabling the exchange of material from analogue to digital and back again. Graphics, film and animation packages present exciting opportunities for the printed mark to be scanned, manipulated, stretched and overworked, whilst state proofs are choreographed with sound and music.

Cut-and-paste push-button technology quite obviously encourages alternative approaches to drawing, collage and photomontage, but arguably such material is greatly enhanced through photomechanical processes of plate and screen printing. Somehow the printed mark ever so slightly embedded and embossed into the surface of the paper seems just that bit more vital, more visceral than the bland flatness of printed pixels.

I have to confess, as a lithographer, to enjoying the physical activity and engagement of graining, rolling and printing images from stones and plates. I like to get my hands dirty. Recently however I have become interested in using the computer again as a tool for developing separations for plates, printed in combination with stones. Based upon research completed at Tamarind in 1996² I have access to computer-generated tusche washes – often exaggerated in scale and character,

which when juxtaposed with conventional drawing creates curious tensions – as may be seen in the print *Alphabet G* (2008). A palette of customized drawing tools that mimics lithographic crayon and wash also presents interesting possibilities. The computer too can be used to colour proof images, thus theoretically saving time at the press.

For me the future thus holds the possibility that digital imaging, drawing, painting and collage can be fully integrated into studio practice. Not so much a hybridisation of printmaking – more a fully integrated approach that will enable me to develop images using crayons and brushes as well as using the mouse; allowing for seamless transition from screen to plate to ink on paper. Currently the software that enables me to do work this way is actually relatively crude and the time and steps required to develop and proof images digitally is remarkably tedious. It is quicker to do it all by hand. There is therefore opportunity for very real collaboration between artists and the people who write software; a form of action research that will enable the development of programmes that are truly sensitive to the needs of printmakers. Integration over interface – the future for printmaking is optimistic indeed.

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Notes:

- ¹ Informal discussion during a visit to Belfast (Northern Ireland) College of Art
- ² 'Developing Customised Wash Palettes and Brush Tools to be used for the colour proofing of images using the Adobe Photoshop computer program.' Paul Croft, research paper presented as part of the Tamarind Master Printer Training Program, 31st May 1996